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STATE FOR NEA/FO - CARPENTER, NEA/PI - ORBACH AND NEA/MAG -
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [OVIP](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF DAS CARPENTER

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: Embassy Tunis is very pleased to welcome your visit on January 10-12, 2007. The Tunisian security services' December 23 and January 3 operations against a reported group of armed Salafists form the immediate backdrop to your visit. Although much about the group and the security operations to take it down remains unclear, you can expect your interlocutors to point to these recent events as evidence of the danger posed by Islamic extremists, with their wariness of U.S. efforts to promote greater political openness likely strengthened. As you know, Tunisia's progress on the Freedom Agenda priorities of freedom of expression and association has been limited over the past year. However, Post believes there is room for greater political, economic and social cooperation in 2007 -- including through MEPI programs -- notwithstanding the recent Salafist threat. Success will require the Tunisian government to change the way it thinks about these programs -- and the goals they seek to advance. Unless the GOT comes to see that it is in its own interest to advance more quickly on political and economic reforms, they will continue to reform, or not, at their own pace. We would urge you to be specific about areas in which the United States can assist Tunisia in meeting its goals in these fields. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

Context

12. (C) The Human Rights Situation: The GOT celebrated Human Rights Day in December 2006 with speeches extolling Tunisia's respect for human rights, and with new initiatives focused on economic and social development. Meanwhile, harassment of human rights activists, defenders, opposition party activists, independent journalists, and families of an-Nahdha prisoners continues as strong, or stronger, than ever. One specific example is the case of Samia Abbou, wife of activist Mohamed Abbou, who was prevented from visiting her husband in prison on December 7. As you are aware, another prominent human rights case we dealt with this year involved the legal constraints placed upon the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH). In addition to the blocking of two meetings planned between EmbOffs and representatives of the Bizerte chapter of the LTDH, the GOT also transmitted a diplomatic note to all diplomatic missions advising of 2002 court ruling, which it said prevented the organization from engaging in activities other than preparing for its national congress. Given the amount of high-level discussion that has already taken place on this issue, and the unconstructive dynamic that has ensued, we do not recommend that you allow your interactions to get bogged down in questions of legal interpretations about this case, which is the direction in which our Tunisian

interlocutors have generally taken such discussions in the past. Rather, we would recommend that you reserve this point for use toward the end of your meetings, making clear that our concern is for the broader principle of freedom of association, and is not limited to just one organization.

13. (C) Hostile Posture Vis-a-Vis Civil Society Interactions with Embassies: Additionally, the GOT continues to actively discourage civil society representatives from interacting with foreign governments and NGOs. In a series of speeches over the past year, Minister of State Ben Dhia, along with other GOT leaders, characterized Tunisians who seek to cooperate with foreign entities "traitors." This message was echoed in editorials simultaneously published in three separate Arabic language dailies September 19 that denounced "so-called civil society activists" who deal with "superpower Embassies" as traitors. More recently, the MFA has reminded diplomatic missions of the limits the GOT places on foreign funding for civil society groups.

14. (C) Visits: Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah will be traveling to Washington the week of February 12 to meet with the Secretary and other high-level USG officials. Your visit represents a key opportunity to highlight the Secretary's focus on Freedom Agenda initiatives, such as Defending the Defenders and the Global Internet Freedom Task Force (GIFT), which are likely to be raised during the Foreign Minister's meetings. Embassy has demarched MFA officials about these initiatives, but it would be helpful for you to underscore their importance as part of our broader vision.

MEPI

15. (SBU) MEPI has had few successes in Tunisia. While regional programs that include Tunisians, e.g. MEET US, Student Leaders, etc. are generally not problematic, activities focused on, or based in, Tunisia are frustratingly so. A particularly difficult aspect of the GOT approach is its apparent unwillingness or inability to distinguish between assistance in "politically sensitive" areas, such as civil society and party activities, and seemingly non-sensitive areas, such as the Arab Women's Legal Network or a small grant to a branch of the Junior Chamber International to train women on business practices. The GOT has used delays and other bureaucratic tactics, as well as occasional intimidation of existing or potential Tunisian MEPI partners to undermine our efforts. The two notable exceptions have been University Linkages and the Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP). In the case of the former, the GOT both welcomes the assistance and feels it maintains adequate control over it; in the case of the CLDP, it has taken years to lay the groundwork to develop a positive working relationship with key judicial partners.

16. (SBU) Even as our MEPI programs are confronted by bureaucratic roadblocks, GOT officials repeatedly tell us that they want to work with MEPI. Your visit represents an opportunity to challenge this inconsistency. First, we would recommend that you point out how other governments in the region have embraced, or at least accepted, MEPI. Second, you could offer some specific examples of programs from which Tunisia would benefit.

Message

17. (C/NF) We offer the following suggested themes/points for use with GOT officials during your visit. In terms of tone, we recommend maintaining a helpful posture, and that you be as specific as possible about areas in which the United States can assist Tunisia in meeting its goals and the potential benefits to Tunisia in terms of public recognition of its efforts. Likewise, it would be helpful if you could elicit specific concerns that your GOT interlocutors have with MEPI, so that we can have a useful dialogue about how to

address them to our mutual satisfaction.

The Current Situation:

-- Impressed with the progress Tunisia has made to date, particularly on social and economic front. Would like to see more progress, however, in the area of political openness.

-- Preview visit to Washington of Foreign Minister Abdallah, noting the Secretary's commitment to advancing the President's Freedom Agenda, including through initiatives such as Defending the Defenders and GIFT.

What is in it for the GOT?

-- Greater political space means that those who have views different from those espoused by the ruling party have the freedom to express those views in a non-violent, non-confrontational way. In the absence of genuine freedom of expression, such individuals may feel that radical Islam represents the only alternative way to express their opposition.

-- Moreover, Tunisia would enjoy far more credibility domestically and internationally were it to allow greater political openness.

-- A stable, secure, prosperous, and politically open Tunisia is the greatest legacy President Ben Ali could hope to impart to the Tunisian people.

-- We are prepared to do our part to help, both on the political and economic fronts.

MEPI:

-- MEPI has now funded over 400 projects worth more than \$400m across the Arab World. We have developed a range of activities adapted to the needs of countries in the region, usually based on requests from groups in the region themselves. Over four years, governments across the region have seen that MEPI is not threatening or imposing an outside agenda, but is in fact responsive to the changing circumstances. Most governments have welcomed an increase in MEPI programs. This is the case in Algeria, where I just came from, and where we have greatly increased our MEPI program over the past year.

-- Unfortunately, Tunisia and Tunisians have not benefited from MEPI in the same way. We would hope that the GOT would also welcome an increase in MEPI activities here. For example, there are a number of economic programs dealing with international trade issues, such as dispute resolution and transparency, that could help Tunisia become more competitive in the global economy. We have technical assistance programs to help increase the quality and competitiveness of the media. Likewise, we can share with Tunisian NGOs the experience of how American civil society has developed to play a responsible role in supporting both society and the political process.

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